John Bowler, cabinet maker, former boat builder
Prior to going out today, I spent some time talking on the phone with Jack Bowler, a cabinet maker and former boat builder in Winchendon. Mr. Bowler told me that the town was full of crafts people, many of them woodworkers. His father founded the company, he said, and added that they built mainly small rowboats and dories, and also a small sailboat that was very popular. They shipped boats to all parts of the east coast, he told me, from Florida to Maine. That was in the early 1950s, when the business was at its height, Mr. Bowler explained. I asked who did the lofting, and Mr. Bowler answered, "My father designed everything," and later told me that he destroyed all the patents for the boat designs his father had developed. "We made 16-foot dories,' mainly of pine but with oak gunnels and stems. "We put the pine in on the bottom and waited for the boards to swell," he told me. Mr. Bowler said that the Coast Guard's safety initiative of about ten years ago drove a lot of small builders out of business. Consequently, he mostly does cabinet work now, and builds only three or four small boats a year, "Otherwise the Coast Guard'll get after ya," he explained.

Mr. Bowler said that they "used to be in the furniture business," before they got into building boats. He said that they made chair frames for businesses in Gardner, because "Gardner was a big upholstery town" at one time. He said that the furniture business is "tough, it's awful competitive, and people don't pay you," that is, don't pay for goods shipped to them. Mr. Bowler suggested that I take a look at the town history that was written some years ago, offering that it would save me some time and trouble. "You'd be surprised the factories that aren't here anymore," he told me. "They're just woods, maybe a few cement foundations lying around." He mentioned Converse Gardens, which made toys, and "The Birch Hill area [now a wildlife conservation area]. There was a town out there, but it's just woods now."

Mr. Bowler said that he and two friends, Steve Parks and the man who owns Bellcraft Industries in Winchendon were all craftsmen working in wood. "We all grew up together," he told me. "Our fathers are all dead now," he added, explaining that he and his friend learned their trades from their fathers, and that all are associated with one another as part of the local woodworking culture of the town.

TC-00-12-FN (12 June 2000)

John Bowler Today I drove to Winchendon to see Mr. Bowler, and photograph a couple of rowboats he has just completed for a client in Connecticut. Mr. Bowler was in his workshop when I arrived. He stopped his work, and walked across his workshop to retrieve a set of photographs he'd gathered to show me. I took photographs of some of these -- rowboats, dories, sailing boats -- and we talked for a while, then went inside and had coffee at the kitchen table, and talked for a while with Mr. Bowler's wife. I also took photographs of the rowboats that had been set out for a customer, who was due to arrive early this afternoon.

Mr. Bowler told me that his father and he owned the business together, but after his father died he

lost the shop to a brother, who then tried to sell the property. Mr. Bowler moved his machinery and equipment to its present location, a 16-room house which once served as a boarding house in the mid-19th century, and was connected with a fine arts academy in Winchendon that was located just across the street, which is now Route 12. The house still functions that way, as a home for disabled veterans, although the population of the home has been gradually decreasing, and is now down to only three men.

Mr. Bowler told me that the men who worked for his father worked on a piece work basis, and as a result were able to make twice what the workers made in other shop, though the boats weren't as well made (screws were spaced more widely apart to facilitate speed, for example, increasing the possibility of leaks). Mr. Bowler said that his father's boats originally had pine cross planking on the floors, would leak unless they were sunk for three days until they swelled and closed the gaps, then raised again. After that they were fine, he told me, but if a small stone got caught between the boards they wouldn't close properly, and would leak. Mr.Bowler told me that one time, his father was selling boats in Connecticut and was about to close a deal with a man who pointed to a few rowboats nearby and complained about their leaking. Mr. Bowler said his father had forgotten he'd sold the leaky boats to that same man only a few years before. The company's small boats were made mainly of pine, but the yachts and fancier boats were built from fine woods such as oak and mahogany, although as already noted, small amounts of oak were used in the pine boats.

We sat in the kitchen and discussed the business, and also talked about Mr. Bowler's cabinet making activity. He showed me some of the work he did for the house -- kitchen cabinets, a hutch, a long table with removable top -- and also some photographs, especially a kitchen he built and installed for his daughter's new house in a nearby town. When we were in the shop, there was a bathroom cabinet in process that Mr. Bowler was building for a client. I wanted to talk with Mr. Bowler about the context of that business in Winchendon, with so many other people at work in small and large shops, building furniture, boats, cabinets, and other commodities for a large clientele. Mr. Bowler had said that he and a couple of friends all worked at various wood related trades in town, and that their fathers also colleagues and friends. But the conversation turned to other matters, and apparently Mr. Bowler had something to do at noon which limited our time together. Mr. Bowler suggested that we visit a friend, whom he described as a master metal worker, someone who refurbishes and restores, even builds and rebuilds classic cars. "Bondo is a dirty word in his shop," Mr. Bowler told me, adding that his friend brazes, welds, fills in with metal, but never glues. A perfectionist. I agreed to make the visit, and we drove over there.

John Thompson, metal worker

John Thompson was in his shop, and after introductions he gave a brief tour. He showed me the beginnings of an old MG (circa 1953, as I recall) that he was restoring, which still had the wood frame, made of ask, exposed under what would be the front end of the car. We went into the big metal working shop, where Mr. Thompson has equipment for bending and shaping metals. Mr. Thompson talked about the difference between shape and form, working with a flat piece of metal and bending it to illustrate his argument. But at a certain point he poised, and asked whether I was working for the state, and whether state or public money was being used to pay my salary. When I answered in the affirmative, Mr. Thompson said that he couldn't talk to me, that he chafed under the tax and regulatory systems imposed by state and federal government, and that he was being driven out of Massachusetts because he could not accept these, and was planning a move to New Hampshire. We talked for a while about my work, about his objections to my being there, about what he described as his hatred for the regulatory system and its effects on small business people.

I should note that Mr. Thompson was not personally rude or aggressive toward me, in fact he was quite generous and even handed, even friendly to a degree. But our talk turned radically from the original intent of my visit, to focus exclusively on this other topic. My sense of it is that Mr. Thompson rejects the federal system outright, believes in self determination (he describes himself as a political conservative and a social liberal), and feels that regulations and taxes are suppressing individual initiative and therefore are dangerous for democracy.

We talked for a while about this, and in this conversation I tried to represent my point of view, and to express my strong interest in local cultures and the degree to which my work attempts to put forward the claims of local cultures, to assert them into the discourses of the larger system. Mr. Thompson answered that he does not recognize or accept the legitimacy of the larger system to begin with. I suggested that a heterogenous society requires a measure of "federal" intervention and regulation, that the situation is different and far more complicated in major cities, for example, than it is in places like Winchendon. I was thinking about something that Arne Naess, the great ecological thinker and philosopher, said in a rare and recent interview.

Mr. Naess's insights and writing underlay the development of the Deep Ecology movement. While this movement is deeply anarchistic in its rejection of modes of authority and of the oppressive/suppressive effects of large (federal/corporate) systems on smaller (local/individual) ones, Mr. Naess said that he nevertheless believes that a measure of regulation at the federal or international level is necessary, given that "local" practices cannot routinely function without sometimes contributing adversely to the overall health of the larger (eco)system. (I had this in mind when talking with Corn Woman's husband at Woodspeople Intertribal Village in Winchendon, too. See that section below.)

We concluded our discussion, shook hands, and we left and drove back to Mr. bowler's shop. We spoke briefly, and I said that I might return at some point or call for clarification of a question. Mr. Bowler said that would be alright, and I drove off in the direction of Fitchburg.

Al Clark, local historian see also TC-00-15

While driving, I changed direction and headed toward Barre, hoping to find or reach one of the people Earl Sample, the director of public works for that town, whom I'd talked with when I first came to the county in March of this year. I originally stopped to see Mr. Sample because in driving around the Barre area, I noticed a relatively high proportion of interesting stone walls, many of which appeared to be in good shape. I guessed that someone, or some group of individuals, was maintaining the walls, even building new ones, and when I drove past the public works shed, I stopped in, thinking that someone there would be able to help, or tell me whom to talk to about the walls. Mr. Sample had given me a few names, including that of Al Clark, a local historian who knows who made the walls, and who's building or maintaining them.

So I drove to Barre, and called Mr. Clark. He was unavailable then, but did agree to meet with me later in the week. We talked for a while on the phone, however, and Mr. Clark told me that he's mapped the locations of all the stone walls from Barre to Petersham, "thousands of acres," he told me, but explained that these walls are mainly associated with old hill farms, and there were relatively few of these scattered across the countryside. Mr. Clark has also participated in a survey of cellar holes in the region, which at the moment is completed in its field aspect, but not in the assembly and presentation of the data. Mr. Clark said that his son, who is a surveyor, also has some ideas about stone walls and stone formations on the landscape, what small piles of stones situated is such a way in a certain place might mean, for example. Mr. Clark said that he'd talk to his son, and also dig out some of his maps, in preparation for my visit.

Roger Kuma, owner of Obaa Sima, African-Carribean-Spanish goods store
After talking with Mr. Clark, I drove to Fitchburg, hoping to find Roger Kuma, owner of Obaa Sima, the African-Caribbean-Spanish goods store in that city in his shop. He was there, and after we spoke for a while, Mr. Kuma drew a map of Ghana and pointed out the different ethnic and linguistic groups in the country (he is Twi, from one of the larger ethnic groups in the southern portion), and talked about the community around Fitchburg. Mr. Kuma told me that Ghanaians have come here because there are many factory jobs available in Fitchburg. He explained that people from his country come here, hoping to get ahead financially and then return to Ghana. Some stay, however, and the earliest Ghanaian settlers here arrived in the early 1980s. He made a distinction between Ghanaians, who work in local factories, and West Indians, who work in local orchards, often migrating on the season to and from Fitchburg, and returning home each year after the harvest.

Mr. Kuma said that his shop caters to customer needs, and that after they opened many Latinos and West Indians would come in and ask for certain items, which they in turn would try to obtain and keep in stock. These include foodstuffs, jewelry, small ethnic artifacts, music, and African clothing. I asked whether local African Americans patronized his shop, and Mr. Kuma said that they did to some degree, as did local Latinos and of course, also the migrant agricultural workers from the Caribbean. The African clothing is made by an informal collective of women in Ghana, the principal being Mr. Kuma's sister. The women sew the clothes and supply them to the shop, where people can buy them off the rack. But they also make clothing to order. If a customer wants clothing with a particular design, Mr. Kuma and his wife identify the design, obtain measurements, and send them to Mr. Kuma's sister, who sews and ships the garment back to Fitchburg. I think that Mr. Kuma told me that he and his wife buy the material in New York, and ship that with the order to Ghana.

The music in the shop is mainly Highlife, a form which Mr. Kuma told me originated in the villages in Ghana, and was played after working in the fields, and after the evening meal had been obtained. People would gather, plays music, and sing and unwind, he said. From those origins, the music has evolved and changed as younger musicians and singers adopt new styles and techniques, and introduce new instruments. In the more recent music, it seems, there is less evidence of traditional African instruments (the tension drum and the flute, for example), and a greater reliance on Western instruments such as horns and guitars. Mr. Kuma stocks a wide variety of Ghanaian music, which includes some of the older recordings, or in some cases, remixes of older recordings which recast them in different styles and beats.

Mr. Kuma played a great number of examples of the music for me, and we talked about the different styles and influences, which include reggae, South African township music, and Nigerian music, all underlain by folk forms. It seems that the South African influence is historical, since according to Mr. Kuma, during apartheid in that country, many South African musicians took refuge in Ghana, and played their music there. Reggae seems to be a more universal influence, that is, the form has been universalized and adopted in many countries in the broadly African culture sphere, from the Caribbean to Africa and North America as well. There is also a Cuban or

"Spanish" influence in the music, Mr. Kuma told me, but it appears that this influence is more Afro-Cuban than "Spanish" per se.

I asked whether there were any Ghanaian musicians around Fitchburg, and Mr. Kuma said that there were, and provided the name of one individual, a man named Livingstone, and said that he would personally contact another man to see whether he would talk with me. I believe that Livingstone is from Cameroon, however, which is another community that appears to be on the rise in Fitchburg. [No, as it turns out, Livingstone is Ghanaian, and is Dickson's brother.] The woman who does hair braiding is from Cameroon as well, Mr. Kuma said. Mr. Kuma suggested that I also stop at the Getty Station on Water Street and talk with Dickson, a Ghanaian who is educated, "a learned guy," he told me, and who has a broad perspective on the Ghanaian community. Dickson's family had been in the area for a number of years, Mr. Kuma said.